

Six Songs for John Cage

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Six Songs for John Cage

For five female voices

John Habron

Six Songs for John Cage

Pasos	(variable)
Melody	(3')
For Him I Sing	(3'30")
News Organism	(variable)
Hymn	(4'30")
El Cuerpo Canta	(variable)

First performance (Pasos, Melody, For Him I Sing and El Cuerpo Canta) given by vocalik at
Museo de Arte Moderno, Medellín, Colombia
18 September 2012

Second performance of same movements given by vocalik at
Teatro de Bogotá, Universidad Central, Bogotá, Colombia
21 September 2012

Notes to performers

The performance space needs to be medium-sized: large enough for performers to walk around and move comfortably, but not so large that in *Pasos*, for example, the performers hardly ever meet.

The songs should follow each other without any unnecessary pauses; the flow of energy should be maintained across the songs as much as possible.

In *Melody* dynamic indications above the top stave apply to all voices.

In *Melody* and *Pasos* the vowels are o = [ɒ] (**lot**), a = [æ] (**bad**) and e = [e] (**dress**); the consonants are j = [dʒ], c = [k], g = [g] and n = [n].

In *Hymn*, an open 'a' vowel (as in **arm**) should be used.

Equipment needed: A pair of claves for each performer
One pair of Tibetan bells
One wooden ball ca 10cm in diameter
Newspaper

Duration ca 25'

Acknowledgements

'For Him I Sing' is taken from Murphy F (ed) (2004) *Walt Whitman – The Complete Poems*. London: Penguin.

'El Cuerpo Canta' is taken from Unamuno M & Blanco MG (1963) *Poesía II*. Barcelona: Aguado.

Programme note

These pieces are intended as an affectionate tribute to John Cage (1912-1992) and interact with his legacy in various ways: most obviously in the use of aleatoric procedures and indeterminacy, but also in more subtle ways, such as a concern for the beauty of a single line (as exemplified by Cage in *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs*) and allowing chords to result from the blurring of melodies rather than any 'harmonic thinking' as such.

Six Songs for John Cage also relates to many other experiences (playing in a gamelan, the paintings of Jasper Johns), types of music (the troubadours, Josquin Desprez) and personal memories. Experiencing music through Dalcroze Eurhythmics has had a major impact on the pieces.

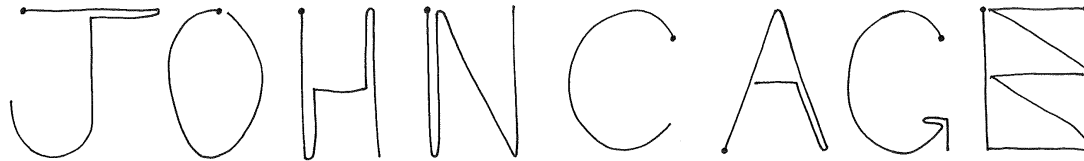
Some movements – Pasos, News Organism and El Cuerpo Canta – could be thought of more like musical 'situations' than pieces. Others – Melody, Hymn and For Him I Sing – are performed more traditionally. This reflects my growing interest in the embodied and situated nature of musical activity.

My setting of the Walt Whitman poem (For Him I Sing) clearly pays tribute to Cage and his influence on my musical and intellectual life; as composers, we all 'raise the present on the past'. The Miguel de Unamuno poem (El Cuerpo Canta) evokes the never-ending rumbling of the world and the call for humanity to listen, a call that John Cage taught us to heed perhaps better than anyone else.

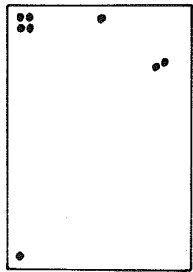
Six Songs for John Cage is dedicated with affection and gratitude to Monica Acosta and vocalik, who commissioned and workshopped the piece, and gave the first and second performances of four of the movements.

Pasos

Performers choose one of these eight routes around the performance space and go to the starting point, indicated by a dot:



The routes are *superimposed*. This diagram shows approximately the eight starting points in relation to the audience; for example letter A starts in the bottom left corner, letters J, H, N and E start in the top left corner etc.:



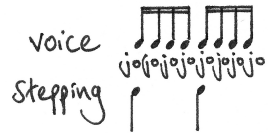
AUDIENCE

Each performer has a pair of claves. The piece starts when the first performer chooses to begin her anacrusis (see below).

All performers start to move within the first 30" of the piece.

Performers walk along the routes they have chosen, according to the same pulse (♩ = 72) and until the letter is completed.

If walking a **consonant**: vocalise repeatedly using the syllables corresponding to the chosen letter (e.g. J = Jo, Ja, Je) and according to this scheme (4 vocal iterations to one step):



Performers alter mouth shape gradually to colour the vowel sound (e.g. producing harmonics), but return periodically to the basic vowel sound. Maintain the same syllable for at least two steps; syllable may change between steps. Choose any pitch and do not alter unless *.

If walking a **vowel**: vocalise held notes using the vowels available (O, A and E; to be sung with long vowel sounds: **too**, **arm** and **see**), roughly the length of a breath and step *twice as slow* as the consonants. Performers alter mouth shape gradually to colour the vowel sound (e.g. producing harmonics), but return periodically to the basic vowel sound. Choose any pitch and do not alter unless *.

The vocalisation will be more or less continuous, but performers should allow their phrases to arise organically from their vocalisations and breathing patterns. Pause vocalisation when necessary.

Dynamic is *p*, unless *.

* There are three 'rules' to do with the spatial relationships between performers:

1. If performers begin to approach one another, they should increase their vocal dynamic level gradually (and according to the speed of the approach) to around *f*, until they begin to move apart, when the dynamic should fall according to the speed of the moving-apart i.e. if one performer moves away by suddenly changing direction, the decrescendo will be quicker. Both performers change pitch at the loudest point of the crescendo.
2. If two or more performers find themselves walking in the same direction side by side, they change pitch; they may also, for the duration of their shared trajectory, take on elements of each others' vocalisations.
3. If two or more performers meet head-on, they cease stepping on an agreed signal (such as a nod) and play the clave rhythm in unison on the last step:

voice { } recommence ...
 claves x x x x x { }
 stepping f { } recommence...

They both immediately move on and choose a different pitch. Naturally, the eventuality of no.3 will include the dynamic changes of no.1, but the performers will stop the crescendo when they cease stepping.

Performers begin each letter with one of the following anacruses on the claves and begin to step on the note indicated by an arrow. The claves do not continue after the first step:



After a performer completes a route, she pauses for 10", then walks, at a comfortable pace and making no vocal sound, towards the starting point of a different letter and begins with an anacrusis on the claves.

The piece ends when all performers have walked once along all 8 routes.

News Organism

Each performer wears at least one sheet of newspaper, so it is visible to the other performers.

The group moves continuously around the space as if one organism, closely packed together, with no performer moving more than a metre away from the rest. The performers move along the same specified route (see below) according to at least 5 of these words:

Spin	Bend	Creep
Turn	Shake	Scurry
Tap	Brush	Push
Crouch	Shadow	Pull
Slide	Twist	Stretch

The whole body (accounting for disability) should be available for movement e.g. a foot slides along the floor, a head turns, a finger taps the air, a knee bends and so on. Such movements may be performed singly or in combination. The group is encouraged to make use of those gestures that can be done to another performer e.g. to shadow another's movements, to brush one's shoulder against another's, to pull (gently!) on another's arm, to tap another's back and so on.

Vocalisation – there are three possibilities:

- Performers match vocally the energy and shape of their own gestures e.g. three scurrying steps could be 'cha cha cha', sliding the palm down one's opposite arm could be 'mmmm' and so on. 'Contact vocalisation' should also be included e.g. a tap on the elbow of another performer could be vocalised as 'ta!'
- Performers match vocally the energy and shape of another performer's gesture or movement, in similar ways to those just described; the other performer's body becomes a score. In this case, the performer who is copying may choose to continue with her own movement sequence.
- Performers vocalise the newspaper text that they see around them: reading, whispering, intoning, chanting etc. Whole words/sentences and parts of words/sentences may be repeated and recombined. Performers may use font size, colour, images etc. as provocations to alter the manner of vocalisation, as well as the movements of others e.g. to intone text in a way that 'bends' or 'stretches'.

Movement may be simplified (e.g. to stepping) when vocalising from newspaper, but performers may still need to bend, twist etc. in order to keep the newspaper in view.

Body percussion:

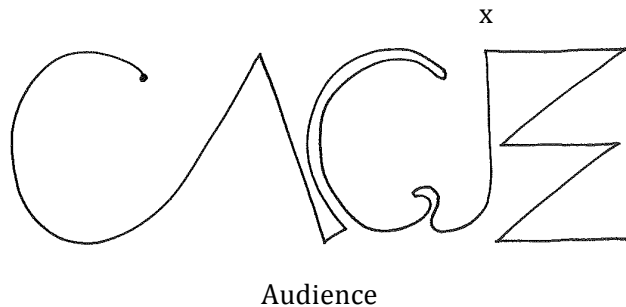
Performers make sounds on their bodies (clap, snap fingers, slap thighs, stamp etc.) in response to newspaper text that they hear. This includes using the newspaper as sound source e.g. if worn as a tunic, the newspaper will sound if the performer taps her chest. For body percussion/newspaper sounds, performers should rhythmicize short sequences of text (no more than 3-4") and repeat once or twice. Extraneous body percussion caused by movements e.g. scurrying is welcome.

The default dynamic level is p although wide deviations from this are possible in light of the above guidelines.

Performers move and vocalise more or less continuously, allowing for natural pauses between phrases of movement and vocalisation. Performers decide individually on the relative time spent vocalising their own movements, those of others, vocalising text and responding to text with body percussion.

The group stops moving and vocalising for 4-5" when all have reached point x, and then recommences.

Route (start at dot, end when the line finishes):



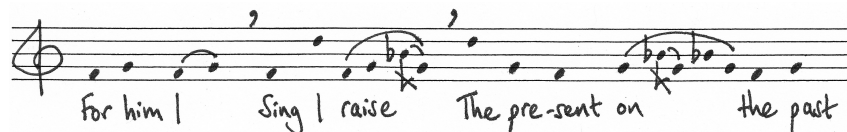
Each performer finishes their current phrase when he/she reaches the end of the line. The piece ends when all performers have stopped moving and vocalising.

For Him I Sing

The text is divided into 9 numbered sections. Each section has its own set of corresponding pitches. The song may be transposed to suit the voices.

Each numbered section of the poem is broken down into smaller word groupings, according to the numbers in boxes to the right of the text. Performers choose which groupings to use. For example, if performing the first section according to numbers such as 3 – 3 – 5, there would be three phrases: 'For him I', 'Sing I raise' and 'The present on the past'.

Each performer fits the word groupings to the set of pitches as she wishes. All notes in each set of pitches should be used, for example:



For guidance regarding pacing, each line will last for 25-45" depending on the number of notes and words to be sung.

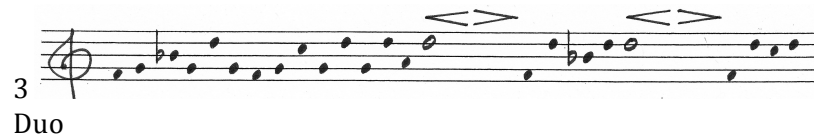
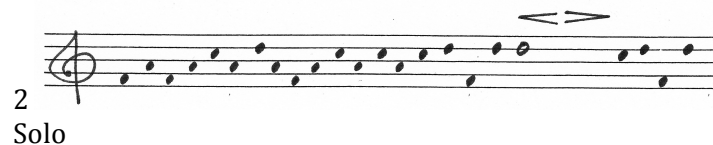
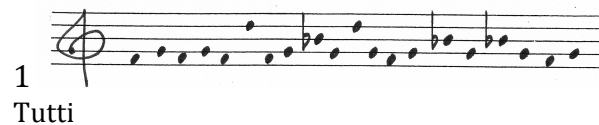
At the start of sections 1, 4 and 7 one performer plays a note on a pair of Tibetan bells (*mf*), simultaneously with the voices. Sections 1, 4 and 7 begin with all voices attacking the first note simultaneously. It is not necessary to begin simultaneously in other sections.

Note that in section 9, notes will have to be re-attacked to accommodate the text. The glissandi should be long.

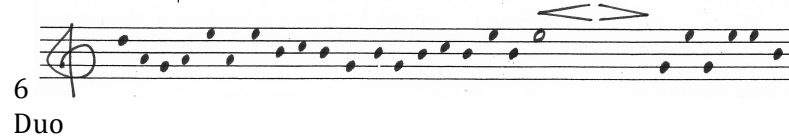
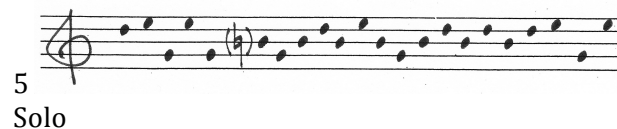
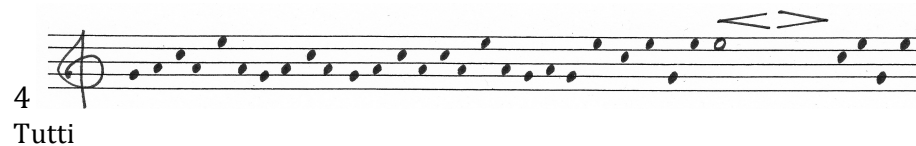
Sections 1, 4 and 7 are tutti; 2, 5 and 8 are solo. 3, 6 and 9 are duo.

Dynamics *pp* – *mf*

1. For him I sing,	3 - 5 - 3
I raise the present on the past,	5 - 3 - 3
	7 - 1 - 3
	1 - 3 - 3 - 1 - 3
	1 - 3 - 7
2. (As some perennial tree out of its roots,	5 - 1 - 7
the present on the past,)	1 - 7 - 5
	3 - 5 - 5
	3 - 1 - 5 - 1 - 3
	1 - 1 - 3 - 7 - 1
3. With time and space I him dilate and fuse	5 - 7 - 1 - 3 - 5
the immortal laws,	7 - 1 - 7 - 3 - 3
To make himself by them the law unto	7 - 1 - 3 - 3 - 3 - 3 - 1
himself.	3 - 3 - 3 - 3 - 1 - 3 - 5
	1 - 3 - 5 - 3 - 7 - 1 - 1



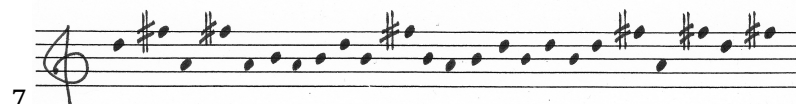
4. For him I sing,	3 - 5 - 3
I raise the present on the past,	5 - 3 - 3
	7 - 1 - 3
	1 - 3 - 3 - 1 - 3
5. (As some perennial tree out of its roots,	5 - 1 - 7
the present on the past,)	1 - 7 - 5
	3 - 5 - 5
6. With time and space I him dilate and fuse	5 - 7 - 1 - 3 - 5
the immortal laws,	7 - 1 - 7 - 3 - 3
To make himself by them the law unto	
himself.	



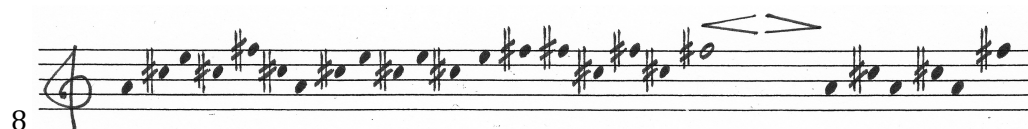
7. For him I sing, 3 - 5 - 3
 I raise the present on the past, 5 - 3 - 3
 7 - 1 - 3

8. (As some perennial tree out of its roots, 5 - 1 - 7
 the present on the past,) 1 - 7 - 5

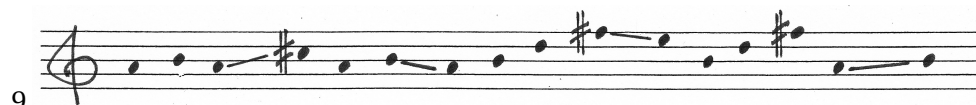
9. With time and space I him dilate and fuse 5 - 7 - 1 - 3 - 5
 the immortal laws,
 To make himself by them the law unto
 himself.



7
 Tutti



8
 Solo



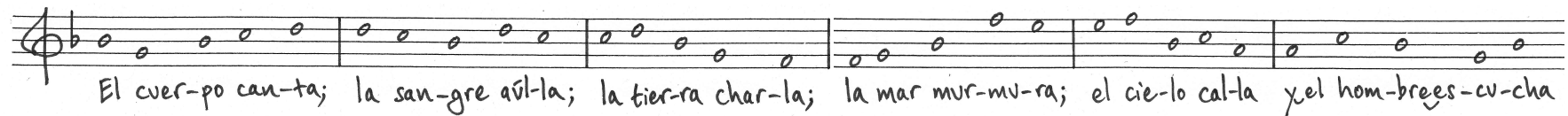
9
 Duo

El Cuerpo Canta

El cuerpo canta;
la sangre aúlla;
la tierra charla;
la mar murmura;
el cielo calla
y el hombre escucha.

Preparation

Performers memorise this melody:



Performance

Section 1

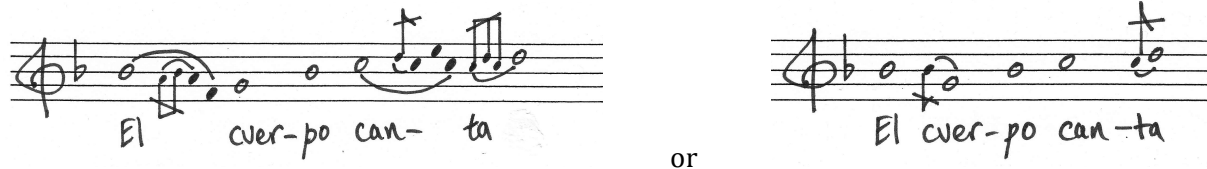
The performers begin in a large circle, each facing clockwise (looking at the back of another performer). There is a small wooden ball (ca 10cm in diameter) in the centre of the circle.

The piece starts when all performers begin to step silently. This is done in unison, reciting the text internally to help measure out the steps. One step is taken for each line of the poem. Pause 'for breath' between each line. Gradually the performers make the circle smaller (the poem – whole or in part – may be repeated as many times as necessary to facilitate this) so that, immediately after the last step, they crouch down and kneel within arm's reach of the ball. Pause again (8-10"). The ball should be visible to the audience.

Section 2

One performer reaches out to the ball and begins to sing the melody as soon as she picks it up. She passes it onto another performer, who takes it in her hands. At this point the second performer takes over the melody, starting with the next syllable of the poem. (The number of syllables that a performer sings consecutively is between 1 and 6.) The ball proceeds from one performer to the next, clockwise around the circle.

The melody should have improvised ornamentation, such as:



The use of semibreves does not indicate duration; durations and phrasing of the vocal gestures result from the movements of the performers or vice versa.

There may be a momentary overlap between voices, if the second performer wishes to begin on the same note that the previous singer ends on, but the sensation should be of a single line being passed around the group; the ball 'is' the melody. The joins should be seamless and there should never be more than one pitch sounding at the same time. Eye contact and gesture will help performers prepare each other to take the ball and the melody. The performers continue to improvise vocally and in movement, allowing their movements to support, echo and free the voice or vice versa.

To aid projection, any performer who finds herself with her back to the audience, may move accordingly.

Whoever sings the last syllable of the poem holds her position and the next performer waits 5" before taking the ball (start of section 3).

Section 3

The poem is sung twice more. During the second rendition, the first performer to sing comes to a standing position and each subsequent performer does the same, when the ball comes to them. The performers do not have to stand still as they sing, but the circle shape should be roughly maintained.

Section 4

During the third rendition, the whole group circles to the left (clockwise), as they sing and pass the ball. The circle is made gradually bigger, until it is similar to the opening circle. The performers may have to move more in order to pass and receive the ball.

Section 5

In a similar position as at the start, the performers now voice the poem in a very quiet speaking voice. The whole group circles to the left (clockwise), takes one step for each line of the poem and gradually makes the circle smaller. Each line of the poem gets quieter. The circling should be paced so that the last line is repeated several times, going eventually towards a whisper on the edge of audibility at the end of the piece.

As the group circles and vocalises, the performer holding the ball begins to extend her arm and holds the ball out towards the middle of the circle, gradually bringing it to head height. The performers come very close to each other and move their right ears as close as possible to the ball, whilst still circling. When they cannot get any closer, the performers stop circling and whispering, and the piece ends.

Throughout the piece, the performers look at each other or the ball, not at the audience.